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Buyer Beware

Used cars can be purchased at places other than dealerships. Private sellers advertise in the classified sections of city, regional and neighborhood newspapers and on the Internet. Be aware, however, that unlicensed dealers advertise in the classified section as well. Another name for an unlicensed dealer is a curbstoner (they sell cars from the street-curb instead of from a car lot). Curbstoners are people who make money from buying a used car and reselling it. Here are some tips for identifying a curbstoner:

- The vehicle for sale is parked along the street or in a vacant lot
- The person selling the car asks you to meet them at a location other than their residence
- The seller wants a cash transaction; no checks or money orders
- The title to the vehicle is not in the name of the seller

Curbstoners do not comply with state or federal laws and you have no protection in your dealings with them. Buying from a curbstoner increases your risk of not being able to get the vehicle title transferred, or of getting a car that has been previously wrecked or which has a "rolled back" odometer.

If you suspect you are dealing with a curbstoner please contact the Motor Vehicle Enforcement Division at: 801-297-2600 or toll-free 1-800-662-4335. You can also [report curbstoners online](#) .

Questions to Ask

You should ask these questions on the phone to help decide whether you want to go and see the car.

- Are you the owner of the car?

- How long have you owned the car?
- Do you have the title issued in your name?
- Does the car have a Utah title?

Beware of a "no" answer to any of the above questions, or if the car's Utah or out-of-state title was issued in just the last few months. Be suspicious of a claim that the seller is representing a friend or relative.

Here are some other good questions:

- What is the mileage? (You might want to ask what the mileage was when the person bought the car.)
- How has the car been driven? (Around town vs. long trips)
- What are the car's best features?
- What major work have you done on the car? Any receipts?
- Did you buy the car new?
- Why are you selling the car?
- Has the car ever had problems with rust? Has the car ever been repainted?
- Has the car ever had body repairs?
- Are you a vehicle dealer?
- What would I need to do to put the car into top shape?

Out-of-state Titles

Utah has strict laws restricting the circumstances under which cars that are declared a total loss by insurance companies can be rebuilt, titled and sold in the state. Utah only permits certain "totaled" vehicles to be rebuilt, and requires the subsequent title be "branded," stating that the vehicle has been "rebuilt-restored." In addition, Utah dealers and individuals in private transactions selling "branded" vehicles are required to tell prospective buyers that the vehicle had been totaled and restored. Vehicles with "branded" titles sell for thousands of dollars less than vehicles without the "brand." Ask to examine the title. Look for the words "salvage" or "rebuilt-restored" on the title.

Mechanical Checks Before Purchasing a Car

When purchasing a used car, it's best to have a mechanic look at it. Even if you are spending less

than \$1,000 on the car, a mechanic's inspection that only costs \$30 - \$50 could reveal hundreds of dollars of potential repairs. If you don't want to spend the extra money on the mechanic, check it yourself. Take a friend or relative who knows cars with you to help.

Accidents. To find out whether a car has been wrecked and rebuilt, take it to a body shop. They can tell you immediately if a car has been in a major accident.

Make sure everything works. Check all safety items and anything that would normally be checked in an annual safety inspection.

The brakes. While driving 30 to 40 mph, being certain there is no one behind you, apply the brakes three or four times. If you get a consistent pull, either left or right, while the brakes are being applied, there is a problem. Check brake fluid level. A low level may indicate a brake problem. In a safe location such as an empty parking lot, bring the car to a complete stop and hold the brake pedal solidly down, then push on the gas pedal momentarily. If the brakes don't hold, it may indicate a brake problem. If the engine dies, it may indicate a problem with the engine, such as low compression.

The tires. Check the tread for depth of wear, the tire sizes for matching and for any other obvious damage. All the tires should be evenly worn. Uneven wear could mean neglect, abuse, improper wheel alignment, worn shock absorbers or springs, or bent front-end components.

Under the hood. Check all hoses for cracks or leaks both when the engine is cold and (carefully) when it's hot. Examine the battery for leaks. Check the oil dipstick (if the oil is dark and dirty, the car may not have been properly maintained). If the car has an automatic transmission, check the transmission fluid to see if it is dark colored or has a burned odor (it should be a reddish color). Run the car until it reaches operating temperature. Look for any smoke or steam and check for the smell of radiator fluid. If possible, pull one or two spark plugs and look for burning marks, excessive oil or corrosion on the tip.

Emissions. If possible, check the vehicle out first thing in the morning after it has sat all night. Start it and see how well it starts up, and then visibly check the vehicle's exhaust. Dark exhaust or a strong fuel odor could indicate problems. You may want to have an emission test performed on the vehicle or look at the certificate of one that was done on the car recently. Poor or failing emissions can indicate internal engine problems.